

Sewer district grants help neighborhoods halt floods, beautify

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It used to be that the residents of Cleveland's Milligan Avenue would find themselves wading through water that flooded their street during heavy rains, the melting of winter's snow or the disastrous combination of both.

But the rising waters of the Big Creek Chevy Branch, which flows under Milligan Avenue, appear to be pretty much a problem of the past, in large part thanks to a stream restoration project by the regional sewer district that has helped get the water flowing toward Lake Erie instead of pooling in the West Side neighborhood.

In suburban University Heights, residents of Ashurst Road faced a similar storm water problem: Heavy rains would send thousands of gallons of water sweeping across a vacant lot and into neighbors' yards.

A \$10,000 sewer district grant allowed the city last year to transform what had long been an eyesore into the pride of the neighborhood, a parklike woodlands rain garden that uses native trees, shrubs and plants to capture and clean water on the property.

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TIPOFF

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Does Cleveland care it's badly dressed?

Starr said the policy should include a whistle-blower exclusion to allow a board member to expose wrongdoing — something the district should be extremely familiar with given past scandals — and said he had concerns about the definition of “confidential information” because the policy states something is confidential if the board or the person providing it “designates” it so. And just in case it's not clear that Starr's actions are behind the changes, the revised policy contains examples of potential breaches, one of which begins: “A board member, in order to gain political or professional advantage, discloses to non-[district] individuals...”

Starr doesn't sound fazed.

“They know I'm not afraid to take positions or run up the hill with a machine gun,” he said.

SATURDAY, JULY 16, 2011

Tipoff

MICHAEL K. MCINTYRE



Sewer ethics policy awaits main critic

The board of the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District wants to adopt a revised ethics and confidentiality policy. But board members have tabled the vote twice despite having a quorum because they want the district's chief critic, board member Gary Starr, to be present for the roll call.

He has been absent the last two meetings, and some of the revisions are aimed squarely at him and at keeping board information out of public view.

Starr, the mayor of Middleburg Heights, often blasts board actions via press releases or media interviews.

He was called on the carpet last year after divulging details of the district's \$3 billion plan to reduce sewage overflows to comply with EPA rules. That information, the board contended, was confidential because it was discussed in a closed-door meeting. Starr was accused of political grandstanding. He said he was just standing up for ratepayers.

Starr sued the board in federal court over the matter, fearing he would be censured. But the suit was later dropped and no reprimand issued.

Starr, who will miss the next meeting, too, because he'll be on vacation, said that he appreciates the board waiting for him but that his position on the policy as it has been proposed is no mystery:

“I will vote no. Why? Because the revised ethics policy is contrary to open government and transparency. Moreover, it does not represent my position on total and absolute reform of the sewer district.”

SEE TIPOFF | B3

RAIN

FROM B1

Grants help communities halt floods, beautify

It's astonishing, says Jean Loria, who designed the rain garden, but the 50- by 200-foot lot sees up to 300,000 gallons of water a year.

"It's a big number," Loria said. "We don't realize how much water comes down onto our property."

The two so-called demonstration projects may seem small when compared with flooding problems faced by the 62 communities served by the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District.

But officials say they show how projects can beautify neighborhoods and provide a glimpse of some of what the sewer district plans to do once it begins collecting a storm water fee and accumulates a budget of \$38 million a year for larger storm water management projects.

That fee, which customers are likely to begin seeing sometime next year, will be based on the square footage of their hard surfaces such as roofs, parking areas and patios. It will be \$4.75 a month for a typical homeowner, more for businesses with large structures and parking lots.

As for the storm water demonstration projects, the sewer district received 29 grant applications this year, up from just three the first two years of the program. The sewer board gave out \$104,000 this month to fund 13 of them.

They include rain gardens at Grace Lutheran Church in Cleveland Heights, Euclid Beach Park and Cleveland State University; a bioswale in the Shaker Parklands; and storm drain educational markers installed by Boy Scout Troop 319 in Brooklyn.

"Most of these projects are right in neighborhoods, and they create green spaces and places that invite neighbors in with a place to sit or walk," said Linda Mayer-Mack, who oversees the projects for the sewer district.

University Heights Mayor Susan Infeld likes the city's rain gardens so much she wants to



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Jean Loria, right, designed a woodlands rain garden on Ashurst Road in University Heights with help from her team, from left, Marci Forbes, Pebbles Bush and Angelisa Crognale. The rain garden will capture and clean up to 300,000 gallons of storm water a year.



NORTHEAST OHIO REGIONAL SEWER DISTRICT

A stream restoration project on the Big Creek Chevy Branch near Milligan Avenue on Cleveland's West Side has helped end flooding. This picture of the project was taken when it was completed in the fall.

den, also designed by Loria, next to the service department yard, where storm runoff that includes road salt and motor oil from the trucks is cleansed through a series of filters, including a bio-retention cell, two gravel beds and a series of berms, swales and plantings.

The Ashurst Road rain garden, installed in November, is tucked into a well-kept tree-lined street off Fairmount Boulevard. An abandoned home, unusual in the neighborhood, occupied the property for years. The city acquired the property in 2009, and the home was demolished, leaving hard, compressed earth and a slightly sloped vacant lot.

"What was here before was a nuisance," said Linda Johnson,

wonderful job."

The woodlands rain garden is anchored by two mature maple trees near the front of the property. Water, more than 6,000 gallons every time there's an inch of rain, is directed across the property by a fishtail design of berms and swales. A 2-foot deep, 190-foot-long trench filled with stones curves across the narrow property, retaining water and giving it a chance to soak into the ground.

The design team — which included artists Marci Forbes and Angelisa Crognale and horticulturist Pebbles Bush — brought in trees such as river birch, baldcypress and black gum. They added shrubs, including spicebush and witch hazel, and plants such as columbine, heuchera and camas-

den is meant to be mostly self-sustaining but that the trees need to be cared for during dry times. Three rain barrels on the edge of the property are connected to a neighbor's garage, so that water for the trees can be collected.

Loria, the designer, said the rain garden will improve as it matures.

"Last fall, when we had some storms with 2 inches of rain at a time, the trench and the berms and the swales were definitely holding the water back. I'm not going to say that it's perfect. But we had good success."

On Cleveland's West Side, Melissa Miller of the Bellairie-Puritas Development Corp. said the Big Creek Chevy Branch has seen its share of abuse and neglect.

"We do a creek cleanup every year where we pull out bikes and mattresses, air conditioners — everything that's been dumped in it," she said.

Miller has led the effort to stop the flooding near Milligan Avenue, which is just off West 130th Street. With the sewer district's \$19,000 grant they rebuilt the stream's bank, restoring plants that help manage high water. Miller also was able to acquire several low-lying lots nearby, which serve as a wetlands.

Mike Vura, a regular with his family at the stream cleanups, said that with the projects has come a renewed sense of pride in maintaining the waterway.

You can hear his enthusiasm when he talks about a family of ducks that have taken up residence near his home and a deer he recently spotted — endearing, visible signs of water-quality improvement.

Vura has lived with his wife on Milligan Avenue for about 20 years, adding two bedrooms to their home as their family grew.

Before the stream restoration project, which was finished in September, a heavy, consistent rain would cause flooding, which was bad enough to close the street a few times a year.

"My whole front yard would be underwater," Vura said. "It would come to my front step. It would be 3 feet in the deepest part of the street."

Both Vura and Miller say that's now changed for the better.

Said Miller, "It really does work to reduce flooding in the neighborhood. So it's a win-win on many levels."